

‘Russification’ of ‘Soft Power’: Transformation of a Concept

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Abstract

Soft power has become a popular foreign policy concept adopted by many different governments around the world, despite its lack of depth or broad applicability. The Russian government is among those eager adopters and has, over time, reconceptualized and transformed the concept to make it fit the Russian worldview and specific foreign policy objectives. The paper provides a critical examination of soft power as presented in the Russian official and academic discourse, and examines some of the key strategies serving as foundation for the Russian approach. The paper concludes that according to the current official interpretation of the concept, the most recent events in Ukraine can be seen as an example of Russia’s soft power success.

Keywords

Russia, soft power, hegemony, world order, Ukraine

Biography

Yelena Osipova is a Ph.D. Candidate at the School of International Service, American University. Her research focuses on international relations, cross-cultural communication, public diplomacy, and Eurasia. She is currently working on her dissertation on Russian soft power and public diplomacy strategy.

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“For Russia, soft power doesn’t have to mean being a softy.”ⁱ

Introduction

“Soft power” refers to the ability to influence the behavior of others – “to get others to want what you want” – following the reasoning that “proof of power lies not in resources but in the ability to change the behavior of states” (Nye, 1990, pp. 153-171). Coined in 1990 by Joseph Nye, the concept seemed to provide a short-hand and easy way to explain why America was winning the war of ideas and to justify the unipolarity of the world that was emerging at the time. Yet, it also provided a formula for moving away from coercion-based “hard power,” towards an ostensibly more “benign” form of influence that relied on attraction and persuasion, and ultimately, on the target’s free will. The latter characteristic made soft power a very popular concept, not only among the American political leadership, but also around the world (Hayden, 2012; Pamment, 2012; Sun, 2012).

Despite Nye’s American-centric conceptualization of soft power, other states seem to be very eager to adopt the concept as well. As Gary Rawnsley suggests, soft power has become “the latest fashionable catch-all term that all governments must claim to do otherwise they are out of step with the times” (2012, p. 124). This is especially true for emerging and re-emerging powers, who want to attain global significance, recognition, and legitimacy for policies that might not be too palatable to their rivals and partners alike. However, to wield soft power, these actors first need to de-Westernize the concept (Rawnsley, 2012). This process involves reinterpreting soft power through their own cultural, historical, and socio-political lens, indigenizing the assumptions and the language involved, and

reconceptualizing it in a way to fit it to their own interests and objectives, as well as to their available resources.

Russia is a case where this process has been especially prominent: there has been a lot of discussion of soft power in official and academic circles, as well as in the wider media, dissecting the concept itself and its applicability to Russia.

However, this effort has been largely overlooked by the Western literature, which remains heavily focused on a few cases, and primarily on the US (Hayden, 2012; Rawnsley, 2012; Zaharna, 2012; Zahran & Ramos, 2010). This oversight leads not only to a major gap in the academic literature and to an overall lack of understanding of how other actors use and adapt the concept of soft power, but also – as the example of the currently ongoing crisis in Ukraine demonstrates – to a misunderstanding of Russia’s foreign policy thinking, motivations, and actions. This paper will address some of these issues, providing an analysis of the Russian conceptualization and adaptation of soft power, and demonstrating how the case of Ukraine should be seen within this broader context of Russia’s soft power strategy.

Soft Power or Hegemony?

Nye conceptualized soft power as the ability to achieve desired policy outcomes through cooptation and attraction, as opposed to military or economic coercion (1990). The ultimate objective of soft power is to influence and shape the preferences of others, utilizing three key resources: a country’s culture and attractiveness; its political values; and the perceived legitimacy of its policies (Nye, 1990, 2004). Nye suggests that soft power comprises leadership by example and the ability to shape others’ preferences, because that brings about attraction and “attraction often leads to acquiescence” (2004, p. 6). According to him, the

principal way through which international actors wield soft power is public diplomacy – i.e. a country’s communication directly with a foreign public – by demonstrating one’s culture and political values, as well as imparting certain norms and worldviews that make the policies of the country more legitimate for the target public (Nye, 2008, p. 94).

Nye tries to present a benign concept that, if taken at face value, has done away with coercion and influence, and is founded in credibility, legitimacy, and cooperation. He seems to rely on the Habermasian distinction between “the unforced force of the better argument” and direct domination (1998, p. 306). However, soft power is still a form of power, and by shaping and influencing others’ beliefs and desires for the purposes of securing their compliance implies that the other actors might be undermining their own interest by giving in to the desires of the agent (Barnett & Duvall, 2005; Lukes, 2005a, 2005b). This weakness is emphasized further by Nye’s failure to specify exactly *how* soft power works: how it cultivates influence and affects decisions. Referring to this issue, Craig Hayden suggests that Nye’s vision of soft power “provides an uncritical [sic] argument for hegemonic control” and essentially constitutes a “translation of Gramsci’s hegemony thesis into a relatively value-neutral concept for policymakers” (2012, p. 38).

Discussing the issue in much greater detail, Zahran and Ramos demonstrate the similarity between soft power and Gramscian hegemony, not only in terms of attempts to create “a collective will” and a certain “social order” worldwide, but also through the establishment of a network of social institutions – a “historic bloc” – to facilitate the maintenance and the reproduction of that social order (2010).

Consequently, hegemony presupposes “an active and voluntary consent on the part

of the people” (Fontana, 2008, p. 86). Furthermore, force is seen as a constitutive element in that process, since “it lies down on a secondary level while the mechanisms of consent prevail in society, but it is still latent and emerges in moments of rupture of the consent” (Zahran & Ramos, 2010, p. 24). Thus, according to the Gramscian interpretation of the American approach to soft power – the presumed universality of its culture and political values, the active promotion of liberalism abroad, and the desire for global leadership – closely resembles hegemonic power and should be seen within the context of US foreign interests, as opposed to some altruistic or neutral effort (Layne, 2010; Zahran & Ramos, 2010).

Russian Soft Power

Russia suffered several major blows during the 1990s, particularly due to all the political and economic chaos following the demise of the Soviet Union, and the wars in which the country was involved domestically and abroad. This made it extremely difficult for Russia to engage in the rapidly converging global political and economic processes. By the time Vladimir Putin became president in 2000, Russia recognized that it was having a major image crisis abroad, not only because of what was happening inside the country, but also because it was suffering from a damaging identity crisis and a severe lack of a “national idea” on which public diplomacy and soft power efforts could be centered (Dolinskiy, 2013b; Feklyunina, 2008, 2010; Lebedenko, 2004). The “color revolutions” in Georgia and Ukraine, and the rapid move of other former Soviet states towards closer ties with the West – at the expense of Russia’s interests – accentuated the urgency of the soft power problem for the Putin administration (Popescu, 2006). For them, the issue fit within the greater geopolitical game that went far beyond Russia’s immediate region: a

global rivalry with, and more importantly, resistance to the international hegemonic project of the West under American leadership.

The concept itself does not appear in Russian official discourse till the late 2000s; however, ideas associated with it go back to Putin's early days. To better understand the concept's later transformation in Russia, it is important to start by examining the related ideas and worldviews that served as foundation for its interpretation, reconceptualization, and indigenization over time. Perhaps central in this discussion is "sovereignty," which has become a fundamental principle in Russia's domestic and foreign policy, particularly since Putin's consolidation of power (Popescu, 2006). Writing in 2005, Nikolai Petrov characterized two basic features in the concept: the primacy of sovereignty over democracy and a sovereign "style" of Russian democratic development which does not have to correspond to Western standards (p. 182).

Kremlin advisor Vladislav Surkov elaborated on the principle in a 2006 speech, arguing that Russia's unique political culture as well as the tendency of gravitating towards chaos and fragmentation necessitated the country to develop its own distinctive view of sovereignty that relies on consolidation and centralization of power, and on the resistance to Western encroachments upon Russian domestic affairs (Surkov, 2006; Ziegler, 2010). According to Surkov, the Western promotion of liberal democracy in 1990s purposely encouraged weakness and instability in Russia, and the country needs to take a stand against the external threats that its sovereignty still faces today (Surkov, 2006, 2009; Ziegler, 2010). This view allows Russia to develop an approach to its domestic and foreign policy that explicitly refuses to adopt Western/American conceptualizations and worldviews, and provides the foundation for defending Russia's own interests at home and abroad.

Another fundamental perspective is the view of soft power as essentially an American ploy to extend its influence. Most of the Russian writing on soft power refers directly to Nye and discusses the strengths and weaknesses of the American “tools of influence” presented as soft power (Kosachev, 2012; Kulikov, 2013; Leontyev, 2013; Palazhchenko, 2013; Ponomareva, 2012b). This is accompanied by the interpretation of soft power as essentially a “projection of hard power” (Leontyev, 2013). As such, the interpretation suggests that the actor targeted by soft power tends to be weak, and their physical security and moral principles susceptible to outside influence and control (Kulikov, 2013; Leontyev, 2013). This further reflects the vulnerability perceived by the Russians regarding Western soft power.

The Russian Interpretation

The key to understanding the increasing prominence of the concept in Russia is the political context of the various “color revolutions” taking place in the former Soviet countries in mid-2000s, the Arab Spring, and the mass anti-Putin protests in Russia itself in 2011-2012. These were directly associated with American soft power and expansionism, and were seen as attempts to undermine Russia’s interests at home and in the region (Dolinskiy, 2013b; Filimonov, 2010; Vapler et al., 2010). In a much-cited article written as a part of his pre-election campaign in 2012, Putin reinforced this view:

Unfortunately, [soft power is] often used to foster and incite extremism, separatism, nationalism, manipulation of public consciousness, and direct interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states. [...] the activities of "pseudo-NGOs" and other structures that, with external support, are pursuing goals of destabilization in different countries are unacceptable. [...] Another

hindrance to strengthening of the bilateral relationships is the American attempt at “political engineering,” not just in parts of the world traditionally important to us, but also during election campaigns here in Russia. [...] The US and other Western countries are seeking to usurp the human rights agenda, politicize it completely, and use it as an instrument of pressure. (Putin, 2012)

Therefore, Russia sees soft power as a threat that needs to be resisted and actively countered.

Yelena Ponomareva, a professor at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations and a prominent political pundit, has written several reports exploring the nature of “color revolutions” and their relationship to soft power (Ponomareva, 2012a, 2012b, 2013). Synthesizing a lot of the writing done on the subject in the 2000s, she suggests that unlike the revolutions of the past, external involvement in “color revolutions” is mostly public and open, enacted under the guise of soft power and the selective appeal to international law and supposed universal rights and values. Ponomareva makes a direct reference to Gramsci and argues that the US uses soft power to extend its hegemony around the world by relying on new ICT tools and its local civil society affiliates to influence the domestic affairs in other countries (Ponomareva, 2012a, 2012b). To counter that domestically, she suggests that Russia needs a strong leader who is confident about his legitimacy, has reliable law enforcement agencies, and is not averse to enforcing law and order by all means. The only way to respond internationally, she suggests, is to create and promote Russia’s own soft power as an antidote to the American effort (Ponomareva, 2012a, 2012b).

Ponomareva’s perspective provides a compelling insight into the thinking in Moscow, shedding further light not only on Russia’s domestic decisions – such as

the “Foreign Agents Law” or the banning of USAID activities – but also on their stance over Ukraine, support of the Assad regime in Syria and the overall opposition to Western involvement in other countries (Abbakumova & Lally, 2012; Amnesty, 2013; BBC, 2012; Calamur, 2013; Ostroukh, 2012). These issues are seen in light of a zero-sum soft power competition between the US and Russia, where Russia must stand up to the challenge, or lose out entirely. This perspective also explains the government’s dualistic approach to soft power: while regarding it as another weapon of the West, Russia is nonetheless keen to acquire the same soft power tools and capabilities to extend its own influence in the region and around the world.

Foundations of Russian Soft Power

The official discourse states that a major aspect of Russian soft power effort should be directed at establishing a world that is multipolar and based on mutual respect (Russia MFA, 2000, 2008, 2013). Perhaps the most significant issue here is the perception that the US is pursuing its interests by selectively violating international law, with absolutely no regard to the interests of others (Kremlin, 2013, 2014; Russia MFA, 2000, 2008, 2013; OPRF, 2012; Putin, 2012). Moscow openly opposes the American “soft empire” (Vapler et al., 2010), suggesting that its approach is very simplistic, exclusive, and based primarily on imposition of its own views and norms upon others (Kremlin, 2013, 2014; Lukyanov, 2014; OPRF, 2012).

The key, then, is to create a competitive alternative to the American approach, which would establish cultural and civilizational standards that are different from those of the US and are more acceptable by many others around the world

(Kosachev, 2012; Kulikov, 2013; Surkov, 2009). To counter the universalist liberalism promoted by the United States, therefore, Russia must present a strong alternative morality: one of conservatism and non-intervention (Kosachev, 2012; Kremlin, 2013; Tsygankov, 2013; Vapler et al., 2010). This position is based on the presumption that Western dominance has created a “crisis of legitimacy” for the unipolar world, leaving a major vacuum that can be filled by Russia through facilitation of cross-civilizational dialogue and reconciliation (OPRF, 2012). In fact, the “civilizational” emphasis is very prominent in most of the soft power discourse, not only positioning Russia as a country that straddles multiple civilizations and can therefore act as an interpreter between them, but also as one that can constitute a strong “civilizational pole” on its own (Kosachev, 2012; Kremlin, 2013; Kulikov, 2013; Leonova, 2013; Russia MFA, 2010; OPRF, 2012; Tsygankov, 2013). As Andrei Tsygankov points out, the new language of a “civilization-state” adopted by Moscow is directed at internal consolidation of Russia – through a stronger integration of the numerous national, ethnic, and cultural groups – which can also serve as a cohesive identity and image to be presented to the rest of the world (2013).

In one of his articles, Konstantin Kosachev, head of *Rossotrudnichestvo*, provides a representative outline of Russia’s soft power strategy and approach. He suggests that instead of relying on soft power approaches developed by others – namely, those of the US and China – Russia should develop its own soft power model, one of development, which rests on three key principles: cooperation, security, and sovereignty (Kosachev, 2012). Thus, firstly, Russia’s relationship with the other country should be based on a fundamental equality between two partners, rejecting the imposition of any ideology or form of government. Secondly, Russia

should respect the internal and external security concerns of its partners and should not risk instability or chaos for the sake of idea-promotion. Finally, sovereignty should be key, because it is supreme in international law and because Russia believes that other countries should be able to make their own domestic and geopolitical decisions (Kosachev, 2012).

Thus, unhappy with a unipolar world order, Russia has taken upon itself to resist American hegemony, even if that means wrapping its own attempts to expand influence in soft power language. To do this more successfully, Russia had to reconceptualize and indigenize the concept, inserting ideas such as sovereignty, stability, civilizationalism, and multiculturalism into the language. Russia has come up with its own resources of soft power which correspond to the three foundations suggested by Nye. In terms of culture and attractiveness, Russia wants to utilize the rich heritage of its past, emphasize its multicultural makeup, wield the potential of the Russian language as one of regional and global significance, and represent a moral pole of conservative and religious values. On the other hand, the promotion of Russia as a diverse, (ethnically) tolerant, and inclusive nation, and most importantly, one that respects sovereignty and stands up to the violations of international law by the United States and its allies, are seen as key to enhancing the attractiveness Russia's political values and the legitimacy of its policies.

Tools and Mechanisms

As in the US and other countries, the discussion of soft power in Russia is closely intertwined with that of public diplomacy and the various specific ways that Russia can try to reach out to foreign publics and enhance its image abroad. These tools range from cultural diplomacy and international broadcasting, to Russian

language promotion, educational opportunities and exchanges (Andreev, 2014; Bovt, 2013; Filimonov, 2010; Kosachev, 2012, 2013a; Russia MFA, 2010; Silayev, 2014; Torkunov, 2013; Vasilenko, 2013). Due to its limited scope the paper will focus on two key aspects within this set of mechanisms which have emerged as the most prominent and central tools for wielding and enhancing Russian soft power: development and humanitarian assistance, and the cultivation of civil society networks abroad.

In May 2013, Vladimir Putin approved a major hike in the budget of the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation – *Rossotrudnichestvo* – increasing it from 2 billion rubles in 2013 to 9.5 billion by 2020 (about \$263 million) (Chernenko, 2013). This increase reflects an overall policy shift in Russia regarding international development aid and humanitarian assistance, which they regard as key components of wielding soft power. Firstly, it is a result of Russia redirecting its development aid from global institutions such as the World Bank, where resources and funds are usually pooled towards more bilateral relationships and assistance projects, where Russia's involvement and support will be clearly highlighted and recognized. Secondly, it is a part of the overall effort by the government to expand its activities in terms of development assistance and funding of cultural activities (Chernenko, 2013; Dolinskiy, 2013a; Kosachev, 2013b; Ryazantsev, 2013). Thus, *Rossotrudnichestvo* is put in charge of overseeing the entire effort.

More important, however, is the idea of “humanitarian cooperation,” which has become central to the Russian discourse on soft power over the past several years (Kosobokova, 2006; Russia MFA, 2008; Russia MFA, 2010; Russia MFA, 2013).

The Russian definition of “humanitarian” is very different from the English one in that it does not deal with government involvement or assistance in cases of grave human rights violations or disaster situations. Instead, the Russian conceptualization of “humanitarian cooperation” comprises projects that involve developing cultural ties, creating cross-civilizational dialogue, civil society support and assistance to compatriots living abroad (Zonova, 2013).

The primary responsibility of implementing this policy is given to Rossotrudnichestvo, which is charged with “creating an objective understanding of modern Russia” around the world by promoting Russian language-learning and education, organizing various cultural programs, and reconnecting with the Russian communities living abroad (Rossotrudnichestvo, 2008a, 2008b). The primary region of focus for Rossotrudnichestvo, as suggested by its name, is the Commonwealth of Independent States as well as the greater post-Soviet area, not only because of the historical, cultural and linguistic ties, but also because these countries have many ethnic Russians living on their territories (Rossotrudnichestvo, 2008c). The objective is to recreate a common linguistic and cultural space, with Russia at its core. Ultimately, this is meant to serve as the foundation for the reintegration of the greater region and assist in the establishment of the Eurasian Union under Russian leadership (Bugajski, 2004; Filimonov, 2010; Kosachev, 2012; Leonova, 2013; Russia MFA, 2013; Palazhchenko, 2013; Vapler et al., 2010).

Rossotrudnichestvo’s task of reconnecting with the Russian diaspora, primarily in the “near abroad,” is in line with the foreign policy objective of protecting and promoting the rights of ethnic Russians living abroad (Rossotrudnichestvo, 2008c).

It is also a sign of increasing recognition of the need to establish a network of

communities that can be organized and mobilized to further promote the Russian language and culture, as well as represent Russian interests in their host countries (Kremlin, 2012; Lavrov, 2013; Russia MFA, 2008; Russia MFA, 2010; Russia MFA, 2013; OPRF, 2012). These attempts constitute an integral part of Russia's "civil society development" strategy, prominent in the discourse on soft power (Filimonov, 2010; Kosachev, 2012, 2014a; Russia MFA, 2010; Russia MFA, 2013; OPRF, 2012; Zonova, 2013).

Consequently, this approach corresponds to Russia's overall interpretation and conceptualization of soft power as influence and hegemony. In its effort to oppose American soft power around the world, and particularly in its neighborhood, Russia is determined to reinforce its influence through financing and overseeing a network of civil society organizations that complement Russia's hard power by promoting and defending its perspective and interests – i.e. a "historic bloc" of sorts. This mechanism is perceived to be even more significant and effective in the post-Soviet region.

The Case of Ukraine

For Russia, given this reinterpretation of the concept, the most recent events in Ukraine concern soft power as much as hard, military or economic power. Ukraine is a country of key strategic importance for Russia for a variety of reasons that range from security and economic interests to cultural, ideational and geopolitical (Coy, 2014; Russia MFA, 2013; Orr, 2014). Yet, the Russian interests have been under constant threat in Ukraine since the early 2000s, and particularly after the "Orange Revolution" of 2004-2005 (Karaganov, 2014; Klepach, 2014; Zatulin, 2005). The calls for NATO membership and later for an association agreement with

the EU, were coupled with hostile, nationalist and anti-Russian rhetoric by social and political forces that wanted to distance Ukraine from Russia (Karaganov, 2014; Migranyan, 2014).

Such developments in the country not only undermined Russia's security interests and its plans for the Customs and Eurasian Unions, but, the Russians claimed, also put the millions of ethnic Russians living on the territory of Ukraine under a constant threat (Karaganov, 2014; Kosachev, 2014b; Miller, 2008; Nemenskiy, 2014; Zazhigaev, 2005). In light of the Russians' conviction that the Maidan protests and the regime change in Kyiv were perpetrated by the West, and the perceived – and propagated – threat to their compatriots living in Ukraine, Russian military and economic responses had to be accompanied by various soft power resources and tools that they had been cultivating over the years (Karaganov, 2014; Kosachev, 2014b; Nemenskiy, 2014; Roslycky, 2011; RT, 2014). This was particularly true since Maidan was initially seen as an indication of Moscow's lack of soft power in the country (Kosachev, 2014b). The events that followed in Southeastern Ukraine and Crimea should, therefore, be seen as Russia's "soft" retaliation to Western interventionism, and a test run for Russia's network of civil society and community organizations that, Russia believes, makes up the foundation of its soft power in the region.

To protect its interests in Ukraine, Russia relied on its soft power by activating its already existing network of civil society organizations to mobilize the local Russian and Russian-speaking community to action. Russia also saw an opportunity to enhance its soft power by demonstrating that it can stand up to the West and act/advocate on behalf of its compatriots who were allegedly under threat.

Meanwhile, to make the process more palatable to the international community,

Russia is trying to invoke universal concepts and norms involving legitimate democracy, protection of human rights and other humanitarian concerns, principles of self-determination, and fairness in international law. The official Russian perspective on the crisis in Ukraine is, therefore, very closely related to its overall soft power strategy and is an example of Moscow's attempt to resist and deflect Western influence by enhancing its own.

Conclusion

Soft power has been reinterpreted and reconceptualized to fit the Russian worldview and its own domestic and foreign policy objectives. Throughout this process of indigenization, the emphasis has shifted from appeal and attraction, initially suggested by Nye, to influence and hegemony, which despite giving the concept negative connotations, has also facilitated its adoption by the Russian foreign policy establishment as a mechanism that can mask Russia's own global and regional ambitions.

The discourse on soft power usually borrows heavily from the language of international law, various normative principles and standards, and suggests that Russia should learn from the West, while reinterpreting those concepts and principles in a way that would serve Russia's own interests. Russia strives to resist Western attempts to undermine its sovereignty and interests by presenting an alternative moral and normative pole in international affairs, and by using various communication tools and a network of friendly civil society organizations to ensure that its worldview and interests are promoted and accepted abroad. This interpretation and approach were displayed across Southeastern Ukraine and Crimea, presenting an exemplary case of Russia's soft power strategy. Although it

has already harmed Russia's relationship with the West, as well as Ukraine, and has certainly affected the perception of the country among the Western public, Russia's priorities are elsewhere – namely, the near abroad, Asia, Africa and Latin America – and are focused on the demonstration that it can and will stand up for its interests, even if those are perceived as illegitimate by the West. In that regard, according to the Russian official perspective, the events in Ukraine can be seen as a success case for Russia's soft power.

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¹ Title of an interview published by a Kremlin-financed project, *Russia Direct*, following Crimea's referendum (Koshkin & Smertina, 2014).